

# ***I can't breathe*** **by Mieko Ouchi**

A reflection on  
*The Green Rooms: The Earth is Watching... Let's Act*

September 2020



**NAC English Theatre**  
in partnership with the Canada Council for the Arts

## **A note from the Co-Curators:**

In March of 2020 the world changed. With the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic, we could no longer gather in person. In May of 2020, following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, the world changed again and, led by the Black Lives Matter movement, systemic anti-Black racism and white supremacy were placed at the center of our conversations. It was a difficult time to talk about anything. It was a necessary time to talk about it all. And to act.

*The Earth is Watching...Let's Act* was a new subtitle for the final chapter in this final NAC Cycle on climate change. And now, as more hectares of forests are burning than ever before, during a time when people are wearing masks for the pandemic and to protect their lungs from the fires, The Green Rooms, as altered as they were by the circumstances of “then”, are speaking loud and clear to our “now”.

We approached Mieko Ouchi because she is a tremendous writer and all around artist of the theatre. In addition, since she is based in Edmonton, Alberta, we felt that she would bring a perspective not reflected in the cities that had dedicated Green Rooms. Finally, we felt that Mieko would highlight the questions and concerns of the theatre and its practice in this conversation. And she has.

*I can't breathe* is a response by one of Canada's and Turtle Island's foremost creative theatrical artists to her experience of *The Green Rooms: The Earth is Watching... Let's Act*. It is a stand-alone document or one that can be read in tandem with the video documentation found on [this page](#).

We want to extend a heartfelt thanks to the community of artists, institutions, friends, family members and anybody else who lent some of their time and energy to this project.

Chantal Bilodeau and Sarah Garton Stanley  
Co-Curators, The Climate Change Cycle

## ***I can't breathe* by Mieko Ouchi**

*I can't breathe.*

A Venn diagram is a diagram that shows all possible logical relations between a finite collection of different sets.<sup>1</sup>

As a writer, I was invited to participate, observe and report on the rich myriad of speakers – scientists, economists, activists and artists – gathered to share and converse for *The Green Rooms: The Earth is Watching... Let's Act*, the final event of the Climate Change Cycle, the third of three deep-dive investigations led by NAC English Theatre. A singular moment drew together the threads of what was happening IRL as the re-imagined multi-city digital conference and gathering took place.

It was the moment when Dr. Jennifer Atkinson simply and devastatingly drew our attention to the interconnected relationships between the three events/movements/issues that we were grappling with as the event started: the rage and power of the Black Lives Matter movement that emerged out of the murder of George Floyd, the shocking materialization of a global pandemic in COVID-19 and subsequent worldwide shutdown, and the grinding, ever present and urgent demand of the climate crisis.

And at the center of this Venn diagram, a simple statement:

*I can't breathe.*

It struck me, and so many others I believe in that moment, that no matter where we enter this circle from, we end up together, in the center.

Affected by, ravaged by, changed by all three.

*I can't breathe.*

For me, from the opening speech by Syrus Marcus Ware to the shared closing performance, *The Green Rooms* became about our need to understand how connected these three things are, and how the unforeseen convergence of the climate crisis, a worldwide pandemic and the re-examination of systemic racism in all areas of society, are ripping open and revealing the deep wounds that have always been there: the inequities in institutions, structures, systems and society that are leading to radically different outcomes for white, Black, Indigenous, racialized and marginalized people. Outcomes as stark as life and death.

And it is clear.

We cannot have Climate Justice without Racial Justice.  
We cannot have Racial Justice without Health Justice.  
We cannot have Health Justice without Climate Justice.

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<sup>1</sup> Definition of a Venn diagram from Wikipedia.

And as we gathered together for *The Green Rooms*, this convergent moment asked of us all: what are we going to do about it?

Action.

Action leads to hope.

## **The Green Rooms**

### **The Structure**

*The Green Rooms* were conceived by co-curators Sarah Garton Stanley and Chantal Bilodeau, and happened over 45 hours beginning June 10, 2020 at 4 p.m. EST and concluding June 12 at 3 p.m. EST. This was a publicly attended event which took place concurrently in eight virtual Green Rooms. Six were in Canada, in Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Vancouver and Kingston; and two out-of-country, in London (UK) and New York (US). The virtual operations for *The Green Rooms* were shared between Command Central in Ottawa at the NAC, HowlRound Theatre Commons out of Boston, and the FOLDA Festival in Kingston.

The original idea of having video and space installations designed and built for performance venues in each of the eight cities, where up to 100 local audience members would participate in person, with unlimited virtual attendance, was, because of COVID-19, rendered impossible. In the end, live performances were held in different venues, cities and places, but instead of audiences attending both in person and on live-stream, the entire event was live-streamed only.

Attendees were offered two options to experience the event: either as a *Participant* or as a *Spectator*.

*Participants* could actively take part through a limited number of participatory slots. Each *Participant* joined the event digitally over Zoom from their own city, or a chosen city if there was not a Green Room designated for where they call home. *The Green Rooms* were brought together through an extraordinarily complex interface envisioned by Sarah, made possible by Martin Jones of the NAC and created with Chantal, Vijay Mathew of HowlRound, associate curator Sophie Traub and FOLDA technical director, Jesse McMillan and a lot of help from the curatorial team. In real time and on screen, *Participants* were able to interact with the hosts, speakers, Room facilitators, artists and technicians and even co-create together.

*Spectators* were able to watch the events through a live-stream offered on the NAC, FOLDA, HowlRound and Banff websites as well as Facebook but did not have the capability to interact or co-create other than through chat, which was moderated and shared with speakers and *Participants*.

The aim of both attendance methods was to set the stage for creative possibilities of distance and togetherness through an experiment in being both together locally while apart, and being spread across cities yet joined digitally.

### **My perspective. Where I am. Where I come from.**

I came to this event and I come to this writing now, from my home in amiskwacyiwâskahikan, colonially known as Edmonton, in north central Alberta, Treaty 6 Territory. In nehiyawewin or

Cree, amiskwacyi means “beaver hill,” and wâskahikan means “house,” and this beautiful land where our city has grown, on the banks of kisiskâciwanisîpiy, or the North Saskatchewan River, has been the traditional home, resting space and meeting place of many peoples, including the Treaty signatories: the Cree, Saulteaux, Nakota-Sioux, Stony and Cree-Iroquois as well as other Indigenous Peoples such as the Blackfoot and Métis, who occupied this land.

I come to this land as a fourth generation person of colour with mixed heritage: my great grandparents on my father’s side came to this land from Japan in the late 1880s. On my mother’s side, my great grandparents came to this land from England, Ireland, Scotland and Germany (via the United States through a community we know as the Pennsylvania Dutch) around the same time. I was born in tkaronto (Toronto), grew up for most of my childhood in mokhinsis (Calgary) and have made my home in amiskwacyiwâskahikan (Edmonton) since 1987. My youngest brother Kevin and I share our parents’ ethnic heritage, my middle brother Jason is Cree and his birth family and cultural home are found in the Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation near Valleyview. We are family.

I live and work as a playwright, director, dramaturg and teacher, as well as the Artistic Director of Concrete Theatre, a 30-year-old Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) touring company, a company I co-founded, and whose mandate is to commission, create and produce urgent issue-based, diverse and inclusive work for children, youth and families. This work happens in a province and region that has a complex relationship with oil and gas, the land and the Indigenous keepers of the land, and climate change. It is, disturbingly, the home of the Tar Sands, however, like all places around the world, it is also full of diverse perspectives, lived experiences and an evolving understanding of the connections between health, justice and the environment.

While Eriel Tchekwie Deranger and I participated in the event, Edmonton did not have a Green Room so I joined and experienced the event as part of the Kingston Green Room.

### **Day One: The Opening Picnic June 10, 2020**

For this first event of the gathering, *Participants* joined Zoom calls in their home cities, or a chosen city, and came together for what the co-curators described as a virtual picnic on a blanket. Viewers who joined the live-stream acted as *Spectators* to the event. The event happened simultaneously in eight Rooms and cities, three countries, and was co-hosted by Sarah Garton Stanley and Chantal Bilodeau.

I arrived at the Opening Picnic more than a little panicked, late, and feeling bad. Given the complexity of the event, there had been a few small technical issues getting logged into Rooms, and somehow, probably due to my own poor computer skills, I ended up attending as a *Spectator*. But I was able to catch most of Georgina Riel’s beautiful welcome before I had to quickly leave and re-enter the rooms as a *Participant*.

Georgina began with a smudge to give clarity and honesty to the upcoming discussions, and to help us all start in a good way. She thanked the hosts and partners, the performers and speakers, and welcomed us from Ka’tarohkwi. She asked us to use our energy and talent over the three days to heal as people, as well as to heal the lands and the waters because we are all interconnected.

Chantal and Sarah thanked Georgina for her wonderful welcome, and introduced themselves. Sarah explained that she was in Kingston, which had been envisioned as the creative hub that would connect all the other cities, and that before the pandemic, she and Chantal had imagined they would be standing there side by side. This was still happening... but of course in a slightly different way. Sarah was now at a desk in Kingston, and Chantal at another desk just outside of New York City, with all of us joining from our own desks across the country and across the globe.

They thanked the many people and organizations who supported the event: The Arts House in Melbourne, Massey University in Wellington, University of British Columbia, The Only Animal Theatre, Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre and University of Winnipeg, Rainbow Stage, York University, Playwrights Workshop Montréal, Concordia University, Centre Phi, Dalhousie University, Ross Creek and, in England, Royal Court, The Gate and The Yard Theatre, University of Westminster and Invisible Flock. They also thanked the Stratford Chef School where students had prepared locally sourced menus for the people in each city.

Sarah thanked key supporters – FOLDA, HowlRound Theatre Commons, the National Theatre School and the Canada Council for the Arts – and introduced three short recorded welcome addresses.

Brian Patterson, Mayor of Kingston, gave a warm salutation to all. He felt it was important to examine the critical issue of climate change, especially in the midst of a pandemic, and he was glad that his city was able to host and work as the creative hub for these important discussions.

Jillian Keiley brought greetings from English Theatre at the National Arts Centre, recalling the impact of the gathering the previous year – in particular the words of Clayton Thomas-Müller, as he explained the disproportionate effect of climate change on Indigenous communities and other marginalized people. She shared the mission of English Theatre: telling stories towards a more compassionate society, with social justice being the necessary lens for these stories. Because climate justice is social justice. She was glad to be able to provide a platform for this critical discussion.

Finally, the NAC's CEO Christopher Deacon appeared from Ottawa. He welcomed everyone to *The Green Rooms* and thanked the co-curators for their tremendous leadership in this experiment. He also thanked the event's partners and wished everyone fruitful discussions.

Sitting at my desk at home in my basement office, paper and pen at the ready, I had no idea what to expect. Sarah and Chantal had asked me so generously to join as the reporter for *The Green Rooms* and without much hesitation I had said yes. But now here I was, suddenly feeling deeply unsure. I had read all the early info Chantal and Sarah had provided me but still, I was having a classic case of imposter syndrome. Was I the right person to do this?

I think I was questioning myself because of how important and critical the issue of the climate emergency is. Who was I, an artist who has never identified as a climate activist, to report or comment on this movement? What could I possibly bring to this kind of report?

It was also because of the forced full pivot to digital, and the secret worry I had that the experience might be clinical or un-engaging.

And I was still processing the deep unease I was feeling over the myriad of offers that were coming to me in the first few weeks after the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter

protests. Even though I had known Sarah a long time, and had so much respect for both her and Chantal, I couldn't help but ask myself where this offer was coming from.

I pushed these doubts aside, and took some deep breaths, refocusing as Chantal and Sarah explained how the event had grown out of previous Cycles at the NAC and acknowledged the many individuals who had contributed to the three days.

As they did, I was surprised at how I began to feel a sense of connection and ease. Sarah appeared so warmly and casually from her virtual headquarters in Kingston. And Chantal, joining us from her home office base just outside New York, was equally warm, charming and open. Slowly, I began to wrap my head around the fact that all the mini-grids we were looking at on the Zoom page were live feeds of all the other Rooms in other cities. Somehow, they were able to pull us all together on one page. It was a little mind boggling. Truly.

Then Sarah introduced Syrus Marcus Ware, the extraordinary artist, activist, writer and scholar who joined us from the southernmost part of Toronto, tkaronto, unceded territory. Syrus spoke powerfully about environmental racism and how the violent systems of white supremacy and capitalism are fueling the climate crisis. We are going through a time of profound change, but he reminded us that revolution is a process, not a one-time event. The virus has shifted our thinking, asking of us what kind of world we want to emerge into. He pointed out that tens of thousands of people on the street in the wake of violence towards Black, Indigenous and Mad people are asking us to imagine new ways to respond to conflict and heal harm. These are not separate issues. Fighting for environmental justice is part of fighting for climate justice. He encouraged us to join activists. Because this is a fight for the long haul and one that involves us all. Because we all want to survive the Anthropocene but only if we emerge into a more just place. Because we don't just want to save this planet, we want to re-invent our shared world.

I was so grateful to hear Syrus speak. I didn't know it, but this was what I needed to fully engage and move forward in these discussions, in this living moment. It was a powerful reminder that discussions around the climate emergency cannot happen in isolation; they are deeply rooted in our communities. The demands of activists on the streets asking us to re-imagine the world are vitally connected to each of us sitting at our desks in different cities. Social justice is a call that we all need to answer together.

Chantal introduced us to a sound composition commissioned for *The Green Rooms* titled *Dear George, you help me be like water* by José Rivera. José described his work as a meditation on cycles and transformation. Chantal invited us to close our eyes and listen from wherever we were, and the spare, haunting mix of guitar, sounds, and field recordings created a quiet and peaceful moment of reflection. For me, that was so welcome. Listening to the piece, I felt the final shards of fear and anxiety I had been holding dissipate. I don't imagine I was alone. Over the next few days, I came to see that these moments of quiet reflection were intentionally built-in. They still stand out as one of the most beautiful motifs of the event.

As the piece ended, Chantal introduced keynote speaker Eriel Tcheqwie Deranger, Executive Director of Indigenous Climate Action. Eriel joined us from my home city of Edmonton. She spoke about the importance of land and Indigenous Peoples' deep cultural, spiritual and physical connection to it. She also spoke about how their vision of collective identity is in direct conflict with the individually focused structures and systems that are oppressing them: capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy and extractivism. She pointed out that colonialism's central goal was to sever the relationship between people and their land.

What struck me most powerfully was her description of a world struggling to come to terms with the climate crisis, confronted by the power of the Black Lives Matter movement and its naming of the systems of racism that have held Black, Indigenous and people of colour back, when out of nowhere, a global pandemic appears. And how scientists and biologists began speculating that the climate crisis and unsustainable capitalism actually worsen the pandemic. But it is too easy, she carefully pointed out, to let this moment lead us to believe that this sequence of events has been a great equalizer. That “*we are all in the same boat.*” Instead, we are actually in the same *storm*, with some people left without a boat at all.

As she concluded, Eriel brought us back to Syrus’ opening talk, emphasized her solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, and urged us to keep considering the connections between colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism, white supremacy and extractivism. On the streets of this country “*we are not protesters,*” she said, “*we are protectors.*”

Chantal invited all the *Participants* to write questions for Eriel on pieces of paper while we listened to a composition titled *Symphony of Questions* by Matt Rogalsky. As the music played, the *Participants* from all eight cities wrote their questions and held them up to their cameras. As the different Zoom windows shifted and changed, different questions bubbled to the surface and then disappeared in an ever-shifting kaleidoscope. Chantal pulled a few out, posing them to Eriel:

*When will sustainability and wellness be valued over GDP?*

*How do we amplify positive changes?*

*How do we remember that the impossible is possible?*

*When do you feel most connected to the earth?*

*What is the one thing we can teach kids?*

As Eriel answered, other questions continued to emerge and appear around her:

*How can we begin land repatriation?*

*What will our children think of our actions 20 years from now?*

*How can art play a role in this conversation? Besides raising awareness?*

*How do we reconcile individual and collective rights?*

*What is the best way to get this to the mainstream?*

Eriel wrapped up by connecting the climate crisis back to Black Lives Matter and the battle of BIPOC to have their stories and voices heard.

*“I want to be clear that we can’t just say we’re all related. We also need to deconstruct our own complicity in the systems and need to ensure we are moving towards real equity for people, and for the planet. ...if we don’t challenge the systemic root causes that have gotten us to this place, we are doing very little to disrupt and dismantle these systems.”*

Next up, Erin Ball, a circus and aerial artist from Kingston, joined us from her studio to perform an aerial dance titled *Intertwined*, created specifically for *The Green Rooms*. She first appeared standing in front of us holding a rope, then lifted herself out of two mannequin legs and into a dance above – revealing she is a double leg amputee – in a piece full of danger, beauty and

incredible strength and athleticism. Her opening disclaimer did not run at the top of the piece as planned but the curators played it at the end. It said:

Rope – a single rope that hangs from the ceiling – is unpredictable and physically demanding. The descriptions are pre-recorded and may not match the timing.

I support defunding the police and Black Lives Matter. If you like this piece, please donate to Black Lives Matter Toronto.

Then Aidan Tomkinson, a 16-year-old youth activist from Kingston, called on us to take the simple step to “*Act, in any way you can.*” Ariel Martz-Oberlander, a young climate justice artist from Vancouver, talked about her parallel and linked emerging practices as both a theatre artist and an activist. She beautifully and humbly called us all to action, asking us to remember:

*“The power of personal stories to open up the places where our experiences intersect.”*

*“That we don’t need to have shared experiences to fight for each other.”*

*“What we don’t need is more allies... we need accomplices.”*

Ariel ended her talk by bringing us around to the emerging theme of the event:

*“Climate change, we know, doesn’t exist in a vacuum; it’s only possible because of systemic disenfranchisement and theft from Indigenous, Black, disabled and queer bodies. So to me, every movement toward justice is also climate justice.”*

Several musical performances followed: a live, powerful and evocative mix of electronic and spoken word created by LAL (Rosina Kazi and Nicolas Murray from their album *Dark Beings*); a short sound experiment titled *Hello Remix* put together digitally by Matt Rogalsky using everyone’s spoken “hellos” at the top of the event; and a final elegiac electronic sound piece by Debashis Sinha, *1 Breath, Many Bells*.

Closing my eyes and listening to the evocative space and movement of Debashis’ piece, I was struck by the simplicity, but also the art and the craft of this moment. It was much more than a cool down. All afternoon, through their choices, Chantal and Sarah had been asking us to go deep, to allow difficult information and questions to come in and penetrate and confront us, but they also gave us gentle corners of peace and stillness to take it all in.

## **Day Two: The Conversations**

### **June 11, 2020**

#### **Climate Despair: Harnessing Grief as an Agent of Transformation**

##### **Dr. Jennifer Atkinson**

In this talk, Dr. Jennifer Atkinson discussed the emotional dimensions of our climate crisis and shared strategies for confronting grief and anxiety over loss without retreating into despair. Having taught one of the first college seminars on eco-grief in the U.S., Atkinson drew on her experience helping students and activists build the resilience needed to stay engaged in climate solutions over the long run.

This was an incredible way to launch the deeper conversations of Day Two. Right off the bat, Dr. Atkinson clearly drew together the threads of the recent Black Lives Matter protests and COVID-19 to the climate crisis and her particular area of expertise: climate grief.

She clearly laid out the connection between Black Lives Matter (Black people are 75% more likely to live near oil and gas facilities and therefore suffer from lung and breathing issues), climate justice (many poor people are displaced because of extreme weather) and COVID-19 (racialized communities are affected by the virus at alarmingly higher rates than white communities). Her examination of the intersection of climate justice, racial justice and health justice hit home the hardest of anything I heard over the three days. Where people live and how they are affected by climate justice, illness and racial justice is inherently political. And it needs to change.

Jennifer's area of expertise lies in analyzing the psychological toll of climate anxiety, eco-grief and environmental despair. She shared one quote from a student, which has stayed with me: *"[our classes] teach us a lot of sad things... But those classes don't address how these facts make us feel."* Such a powerful statement from a young person about the poor job we adults are doing in supporting children and youth as they grapple with the same huge questions we ourselves struggle to face. The climate crisis can't just be about facts; it also has to be about the emotional toll that seeing our world change in front of our eyes has on our hearts, our minds and our sense of hope. We place so much pressure on young people to not only have hope, but also to inspire it in adults. Greta Thunberg said it most bluntly at the UN Climate Action Summit in September of 2019 as she stared down her audience:

*"This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! ...You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!"*

Jennifer's observations about her own students made me wonder: Are we giving children and youth a safe space to articulate their most honest feelings around the climate crisis? Do we give them permission to say that they are not hopeful? That they are, in fact, experiencing grief, depression and despair? One of the most powerful aspects of Greta's activism is that it confronts adult expectations, as well as constructs and tropes about children's roles as conveyors of hope.

Jennifer works with people to build their resilience around climate justice. She introduced the idea that perhaps grief isn't something to be fixed and that, if we let it, it can be a source of inspiration; it can be a force for transformation – it is a political act. And the best antidote to grief is to take action, in particular, action that directs energy towards collective (political) solutions rather than personal (consumer) responsibility.

That rang so true for me. While I have never identified as a climate justice activist, her words support how I have always felt about my own activism around diversity, equity and inclusion.

Action Leads to Hope.

She also reinforced one last key idea: We can't just leave climate change up to scientists. We need the facts, sure, but we also need to include our feelings and our hearts.

Everyone's perspective is of value.

### **How Artists Respond: Climate Crisis**

**Kendra Fanconi, Ken Schwartz and Anthony Simpson-Pike, moderated by Kevin Matthew Wong**

This panel conversation featured theatre artists from Canada and the UK who have shown a commitment to addressing the climate crisis through their work – questioning their aesthetics and practices to better fight injustices, developing partnerships with scientists and various organizations, engaging with their community in new ways, and demanding systemic change.

This was a lovely 45-minute conversation between three artists hailing from two of the coasts of Canada and one from across the ocean, in the UK. Kendra, Ken and Anthony were hosted by Kevin, co-founder and Artistic Director of Broadleaf Theatre, a company in Toronto that creates original works based on local, national, and global environmental issues. Anthony is a theatre maker and dramaturg based in London (UK), Associate Artist at the Gate Theatre, Notting Hill and Associate Director at the Yard Theatre in Hackney. Ken is a theatre director, playwright and arts activist, Artistic Director of Two Planks and a Passion Theatre, and co-founder of the Ross Creek Centre for the Arts, both in King's County, Nova Scotia. Kendra is the artistic director of The Only Animal, a company dedicated to a theatre that springs from a deep engagement to space. She lives in Sechelt, British Columbia.

Kevin launched the discussion with a seeding question: *How do your identities and personal lives intersect with the work that you create and the audiences you serve?*

Anthony works from a political position because his identity as a queer and Black person is politicized. He talked about the danger of a single story, which can become the *only* story we know about a people. He wants to tell multiple stories to battle this singularity and engage in broadening narratives... He also constantly asks himself in his work *"Who gets to be on stage?"* He believes one of the big shifts that needs to happen in UK theatre is to stop differentiating what is considered "community work" from "professional work."

In my opinion, this is something that very much happens in Canada as well. Anything considered too strongly "ethnic" or "cultural" is often cleaved off from mainstream theatre and put into the 'community theatre' basket, or seen as more comfortably housed in a mono-cultural professional theatre organization. This idea comes from the fallacy that only people from the represented culture will like/understand/relate to the work, and also, of course, from the white supremacist viewpoint that *white stories are universal* that *white is neutral*. Not to say that there isn't great value and power in BIPOC-led arts organizations creating work from their community for their community, but if this is the only place stories about a culture are seen, it becomes problematic.

Ken lives in rural Nova Scotia. He talked about how his rural life is so powerfully connected to his artistic work. His company performs on a 180-acre farm, and the themes of their work are always seen through a rural lens. Their audience is made up of two groups: a local rural audience drawn from a 20 km circle, and a group of urban dwellers (mostly from Halifax) who seek to journey to the farm for a rural experience.

Kendra is the daughter of a scientist and an activist, and her ancestors were farmers. She has a small farm on the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia, and moved there looking for a closer relationship with the natural world. As such, she notices a lot of very simple things that are changing around her. Her work often happens on the land in different ways. Audiences are almost always connected to the place where the company performs; it is usually a place that the audience already loves.

I was really struck by the statement Kendra made: that she “*seeks to make people fall in love with a place, because you will seek to protect what you love.*” This feels so connected to what Jennifer said earlier in the morning around creating narratives about feelings and emotions, not just facts. Facts can show us truth and shock us into action, but feelings and emotions can equally speak to truth and perhaps move us into deeper action over the long term. I certainly feel that in my work with children and youth.

Kevin asked each panelist about the organizational structure of their company and the connection of their work to climate change.

For Kendra, the values needed to address the climate crisis are infused in her company’s activities. This is evidenced through carbon budgeting, a no-fly policy, a buy-nothing-new policy and the themes of their work as well. This has led to collaborations with scientists and others to find ways to make work with concrete outcomes, without being didactic. For example, their work with the David Suzuki Foundation involved creating the Artist Brigade to bring artists to the forefront of the climate emergency. It was powerful to hear Kendra echo Eriel and Jennifer: artists are not only *needed* but *wanted*.

Ken spoke about the Ross Centre and how, since they perform outdoors, they can see the effect of climate change through changing weather patterns. What started as an artistic choice to strip away artifice in order to create a pure and direct interaction between artists and audiences in a shared natural space has become a political choice. Because of the changes they see, the members of the company have necessarily become climate change activists.

I relate to this idea of activism growing out of artistic choices at Concrete. What started off as a seemingly simple artistic choice to mirror the demographics of the schools we tour to in our casting many years ago, quickly became a vastly more political one when faced with the stark lack of diverse casting in both TYA and adult theatre in this country.

Anthony sees himself at the beginning of his journey in terms of engaging with the climate crisis, but he is clear on the fact that his work seeks to broaden perspectives and stories. He feels that we are stuck in one story about capitalism, and we are never offered alternative stories. He added that in the UK, companies are more focused on content that tells individuals that climate change exists, rather than on punching up at theatrical and industrial systems and structures that could have a much larger impact.

Anthony asked: “*What if we prepared for the future now? What if we rehearsed for the future? Rehearsed the way we would like to interact in the future?*” These questions connect so deeply with our work with children and youth at Concrete, our early roots in popular theatre, and the work of Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal. Boal founded the Theatre of the Oppressed and used theatre as a radical tool for education and social and political change along with fellow Brazilian educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire. An advocate of Critical Pedagogy, Freire believed that knowledge cannot be politically neutral, and that the act of teaching and learning were in themselves political acts. We still center our work in the idea that theatre is “a rehearsal

for change.” This idea comes from Boal’s famous quote *“The theatre itself is not revolutionary: it is a rehearsal for the revolution.”* Literally, our plays are most often purposely set up in liminal spaces where we try out future actions and moments, and where students can watch, rehearse and imagine how things might play out in real life. I had never thought of this quote in relation to the climate crisis, but of course, it applies. And powerfully so.

Ken shared questions he has about what we need to recover and what we can leave behind when the world re-emerges after COVID-19: *“This moment is asking us: What else do we want to see if we want to see something different from what we have now? What do we want to recover?”*

The conversation circled back to grief and to the fact that grief freezes people up. Kendra suggested that perhaps the warmth of our human stories could help. Our ability to envision things as artists is something that climate workers could use. That in fact we are being called to bring our imaginations to the work!

We ended up with time for only one question. A young artist asked: *What suggestion or advice do you have for someone who wants to start a theatre company that is environmentally responsible and politically involved in fighting climate change?*

Ken answered and wrapped it up with this powerful idea:

*“Don’t be limited by the architecture of the institutions that already exist. Don’t let the way things have been done before be a restriction on your art.”*

### **Leadership and Structures for Change – Sarah Garton Stanley and Ravi Jain**

Ravi Jain is a stage director known for making politically bold and accessible productions for both small and large theatres. Along with being co-curator of *The Green Rooms*, Sarah works extensively as a director and dramaturg across the country and is the Associate Artistic Director for NAC English Theatre.

Ravi started off by revealing that the conversation had been radically reframed from its original format and intent. Originally conceived as a panel which would have included three other folks, it was revised to be a one-on-one conversation between himself and Sarah. Given the Black Lives Matter protests, the emerging focus on white supremacy in the arts, and Weyni Mengesha’s withdrawal, he felt deeply uncomfortable being the only person of colour on the original panel.

Ravi was quite emotional when he expressed his worry that at this critical turning point, this historical moment, nothing would actually happen. Sarah followed by stating that when COVID started, and this applies to the climate crisis as well, people said it was a great equalizer, but it’s not. *“It’s not an equal problem, but it’s an issue for everybody. Yet there are certain people who benefit, as Noam Chomsky would say, there are certain people who are benefitting from these problems rather than being interested in solutions.”* It was a raw moment. It was clear that they were both nervous and uncertain about having this conversation.

For Ravi, trust was broken when George Floyd was murdered. White colleagues’ responses to this moment were difficult to trust because these colleagues clearly didn’t understand or accept the magnitude of white supremacy. He pointed out that even though many of them didn’t own

the white supremacist systems, they participated in them in many ways and perhaps even upheld them. The challenge is, they see themselves on the side of the Black, Indigenous and POC, not on the side of the white police officer.

Sarah asked what would happen if all the white theatre leaders stopped running theatres right now. *“How come there is not a long line of people ready to step in? What are the structural issues keeping people out?”* She brought Ken’s closing remark from the last conversation back into the room and asked: *“Do we even need to do it within the structures we know?”*

Ravi acknowledged that there are structural reasons as to why the BIPOC community might not have a slate of people ready for artistic directorships, but he also questioned whether we know if they are ready or not. So many BIPOC, in particular women, have been dismissed for so long. He wondered if we are really the best judges of readiness. Or is this just another example of more assumptions being made?

I agree heartily that BIPOC women, and I would add non-binary people, have long been dismissed as “not ready” for artistic directorships by non-diverse boards of primarily men. I have been one of them. This is due to a mix of factors including a lack of training, mentorship and assistantship opportunities, and boards devaluing the work that women and non-binary folk have primarily had access to (non-A House, TYA and indie directing gigs and artistic directorships). Because of this, I now help to lead a chapter of the 3.7% Initiative in Edmonton as part of a decentralized organizing committee, which is lightly hosted at Concrete. We used to call ourselves the YEG chapter (YEG is the airport code for Edmonton and a commonly used nickname), but now we call ourselves YEG+ as we have so many members joining us from Calgary, Lethbridge, Banff and beyond. Modeled on Sherry J. Yoon’s original 3.7% Initiative hosted at Boca del Lupo Theatre in Vancouver, our chapter, like the original, aims to help ethnically and culturally diverse women and non-binary people find greater success in their theatre practice, and build artistic leadership skills. In 2017, when the initiative was started, 3.7% represented the percentage of diverse women and non-binary people in artistic leadership roles in Canadian Theatre. We have identified for years that we are missing generations of BIPOC women/non-binary artistic leaders in our city and province. We are doing our best to mitigate this through an intense focus on peer-to-peer education and leadership training. Last January, we brought Nike Jonah from London, UK to the Banff Centre to lead an Artistic Leadership Training Program for 26 members. Currently, we have a group of 35+ members who have just completed Alberta-based anti-racism training, customized for our BIPOC cohort.

Back to the conversation, Ravi drew our attention to Nina Lee Aquino and Weyni Mengesha as examples of the challenges BIPOC women face in Toronto. Both came into their artistic director positions after previous artistic directors were fired. Although they are well regarded now as leaders, they were not sought out and welcomed when they arrived. Many people were against them.

Sarah noted that she, like so many white people, wants to be one of the “good ones”, but acknowledged that at times, she understands she is the enemy – because of her privilege and her desire to work not as an artistic director but from a different position in an organization. She acknowledged that she was able to hide behind leadership.

It was fascinating to hear them both reflect on conversations about white supremacy happening between white and BIPOC organizations, the harm this has caused, and the lack of support from national funding bodies for diverse companies. Ravi wondered if the calls to Defund the Police could be moved over to large white arts organizations. Could we see a parallel action like

“Defund the Institution” that would ask them to spread some of their operating money out in the community? What would that do to our theatre community?

COVID has shown us that massive changes in government and systems can happen quickly despite everyone’s long held belief that this was completely impossible. So now the question is: can this happen in theatre? Can it happen in relation to the climate crisis?

Sarah brought it back to the central question that Ravi had stated was so important to him: *“How do we have a conversation about the climate, at this point in time, in North America, when people are dying, and Black bodies in particular, and Indigenous bodies in particular, are being completely devalued?”*

Ravi, in turn, tied it back to the arts, and to our own communities, because *“it’s also that we’re talking about the devaluing and dehumanizing of Black, Indigenous and POC in our community, by our friends.”*

Yep. This last point was one of the hardest things for me to process over the few weeks prior to *The Green Rooms*: having to watch in real time white colleagues and some dear friends “discover” that systemic racism exists in the theatre. And witnessing them acknowledge for sometimes the very first time that racism has inhibited our success and growth as racialized people. Not a stranger’s success, but their friend or colleague’s success. How can this be? I feel like I’ve brought this issue up many times. I’ve talked about it. So have many, many others. Did they not hear? Did they choose to not take it in? And if so, why? Because it was uncomfortable? Because they didn’t want to see themselves, as Sarah said, as the enemy? Or was it because they themselves were in a place of comfort and relative success? That they didn’t actually want things to change?

There are no easy answers to these questions, and Sarah and Ravi got to a place in the conversation where neither was sure if they agreed or disagreed on these critical issues, or even if they had a shared analysis of the situation. And that made sense to me. I feel the same way.

Even though this was a conversation between old friends and colleagues, the truth is: it’s still an evolving conversation. And as Ravi says: *“it’s still very painful. It’s a mess.”*

Ravi mentioned that he had said to someone: *“I wish we could go back to lying. Because I was so good at it. I was so good at it. I didn’t need any of you all to know how much I was affected by this. And I’ve had tonnes of friends come to me and say: are you okay? Are you okay? I didn’t know you were so sad before. But...we all are. ...the ease of saying I’m listening, it’s so false. You gotta listen. It’s gotta hurt. If it doesn’t hurt, you’re not listening, you’re not looking at the right thing. It’s true. I think of the climate. We have to all face ourselves and our choices. And live with that.”*

Ravi backed up that idea with a story of going to leading Canadian Actor Karen Robinson for support. She said: *“The revolution will be long and it will be messy.”* All we can do for each other is keep renewing our commitment by showing up.

And we need to be in it for the long haul. I have felt that every day these past few months.

Because that is how trust is built. That is how change is made. Over the long term. And not just with words or lip service, but with action. Action leads to hope, right? That’s what I try to live by.

I try to take action every day with my incredible Black and Indigenous colleagues, my colleagues of colour, my siblings in the 3.7% Initiative and my white friends and colleagues who have their hearts and their minds open, who truly want to see change happen.

I let go of my side of the tug-o-war rope on the rest.

## **Averting Climate Breakdown: Insights from Ecological Economics** **Tom Green**

Tom Green is an ecological economist at the David Suzuki Foundation, who focuses on climate issues. Ecological economists who ground their theories in biophysical realities, offer new ways to understand the economy and wellbeing. In his session, Tom explored why the economics profession has been so willingly blind to the climate crisis, and how aiming to live more modestly can be good for people and the planet. Ambitious climate action however, can be stalled by those who see a course correction as a threat to economic progress and business interests. So, how can artists play a role in lifting society's economic blindfolds and offer glimpses of alternative futures?

Tom launched his talk by revealing he had not planned to be an economist but was drawn to it because of how badly off our climate was. Economic theory can have such a strong impact on what we can do in regards to the climate, but had he not taken that path, he might have pursued a life in the theatre or worked as a writer.

Right off the bat, he acknowledged that economic theory has traditionally been the domain of older white privileged men, which is hugely problematic. Limited perspectives have led to limited ideas for solutions.

After World War II, economists focused on economic growth. Good news from this push was incredible growth in GDP, an increase in life expectancy and many other positive indicators. However... ecological indicators also showed parallel stresses on the planet and an increase in economic inequality.

*Limits to Growth*, a 1972 report to the Club of Rome, was a critical document, in Tom's view, that was brusquely dismissed by economists and government. The central model within it indicated disaster if economic growth was so aggressively pursued. The report was ignored. In 2016, a group reviewed the report and terrifyingly, found that we are on track to almost perfectly match the original disaster model.

Tom pushed back on the idea of "clean growth." He also talked about how mainstream economics support ideas like: 1) economies must grow; 2) wellbeing increases with consumption; 3) wealthier societies take better care of the environment; and 4) biophysical limits to growth are illusory since markets can address scarcities. But in reality, because of income inequality, wellbeing has improved vastly *differently* for different sectors of our society. On a global scale, we haven't seen much progress at all.

He introduced us to Kate Raworth (an English economist who works for the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge) and her "donut economics" model, which would allow us to meet our critical needs, without exceeding the ecological ceiling. New Zealand, Bhutan and Amsterdam are current examples of countries/cities following her innovative ideas.

He also reminded us that we need to bring down emissions by about 7% per year to meet the target of limiting global warming to 1.5C or 2C. To put this in context, during our recent countrywide COVID-19 pause, we only achieved a 6% reduction. Canada is already way behind in terms of meeting its goals. And sadly, it's not individuals that are primarily responsible for this. The oil and gas sector is a huge part of it.

It was quite disheartening to hear that policies matter more than individual actions. Of course, I knew that on a fundamental level, but the stark reality that 75% of emissions are from oil and gas, transportation, electricity and heavy transport is still overwhelming. Perhaps this is why people become so discouraged. Fighting government and policy can feel insurmountable, even more so than trying to convince other fellow humans to do better on a local, personal scale.

Tom revealed he doesn't put energy into changing the ideas of mainstream economists. Instead, he feels that energy is better spent on talking to people about supporting wellbeing and care for the biosphere and considering alternatives to capitalism – as well as encouraging individuals to mobilize as a group to talk to governments and ask for policy change.

I connected Tom's last points to the conversation between Sarah and Ravi, and to my own personally evolving conclusions about where to put my energy for change. It feels important to think this through carefully and prioritize so as to prevent burnout and to keep focus on areas where there is possibility for movement.

The first question from *Participants* and *Spectators* was about the absence of women in positions of power in economics. Tom agreed that this was a major issue, and pointed out that there is a similar absence of Black, Indigenous and POC, as well as economists from Africa and South America, who aren't seen as having the same standing as economists from the five main schools in North America and Europe. All of which leads to very limited perspectives on global issues. More questions were asked about the systemic sexism and racism that keeps these people out. Tom agreed that there are not clear pathways for women and BIPOC to access positions of leadership and influence in the field of economics. He noted, however, that ecological economists often buck this trend because they tend to come from racialized communities that are grappling with an urgent local issue. But ecological economists have other struggles in terms of access. Tom revealed that he had his own battle to find a university in British Columbia where he could complete his Masters degree in ecological economics. In fact, two fought him on it; they didn't want to recognize the *existence* of ecological economics in their department.

Pretty shocking.

### **The Future: What is it?**

**Donna-Michelle St. Bernard and Jordan Tannahill, moderated by Sarah Garton Stanley**

For this conversation, two of Canada's finest playwrights and thinkers shared experiences of activism and how they intersect with their work. From Extinction Rebellion, queer politics, anti-racist action to equity, inclusion and diversity work, these late night conversants dug deep into possibilities for the future.

Donna-Michelle (or DM) works as an MC, playwright and agitator. Jordan Tannahill works as both a playwright and director. DM joined us from Toronto while Jordan joined from London, UK. Both were asked to speak for 10 minutes about the future from their perspective to launch the discussion.

DM launched her 10 minutes with a fantastically epic list of 10 “*random reflections*”. They included:

1) *The future is how we choose to evolve in this moment in order to meet the coming moment with strength instead of... waiting for change to happen and hoping we can catch up.*

2) *How can we gather? How can I presence others now? Who I could not presence before? How can I see more of what I have been oblivious to? Or had reasons not to see?*

3) *Creating things that we imagine when we thought we were just kidding or fantasizing... allows us to imagine better things that will be actualized because we imagined them.*

4) DM referenced an aspect of the premise of the world from *The Marrow Thieves*, a Canadian sci-fi book by Cherie Dimaline. In her words she explained it as: “*there will come a time when those of us who have been considered extraneous will be needed in some way, but instead of being valued because we are needed, that need will become a danger to us. We will be hunted for the thing that is needed.*” DM asked: *How can we be purposeful about not emulating this pattern so that we are not takers?*

5) *The future is finding out what we never needed. What we gave up; what we don't need to get back. What we still don't need, but haven't noticed yet.*

6) *How can I expand that into bigger thinking?* She gave a great example of thinking about shipping gravel across Canada as part of a tour. *Why would I fly gravel across the country? I'm a fool and so are you.*

7) *New tools are being standardized. And familiar tools are being phased out. What do I still have to offer, teach or share that is newly or differently needed?*

8) *Contemplating the future can be an act of escapism but also an act of mapmaking.*

9) *Aesthetic survival. Is it possible to engage with these instruments without investing value in perfection?*

10) *The future is unknown. And I wonder how I can stay fluid without ever being watered down?*

Jordan then spoke about his involvement with Extinction Rebellion, a global environmental movement that uses nonviolent civil disobedience to compel government action on climate and in particular the Spring Rebellion in London in 2019. The event happened over 10 days and was divided into four actions. Activists took over one major site in each quadrant of the city: Waterloo Bridge, Oxford Circus, Parliament Square and Marble Arch. Jordan described the ways in which performative acts were critical to the success of the event: the theatricality of every day citizens gluing themselves to buses and buildings and the use of props like a huge pink boat. A German friend pointed out to him that in English, a phrase activists regularly use is “*staging a protest.*” That really struck him as significant, and more and more, he has become aware of the theatricality of effective activism. He wondered out loud how the theatrical training and skills that artists bring to the table could help events imprint themselves on the minds of the public, and how this might transform direct actions into acts of performance art as much as activism. Jordan worked on the Waterloo Bridge action. He was arrested, charged and later released. He reflected on who was able to put their bodies forward to be arrested, and perhaps what it was

like for the public to see bodies that are not usually arrested, like white protestors and seniors, being taken away by police.

Jordan also shared his experience with a direct action at the Dorchester luxury hotel where they used theatrical disruption at high tea to bring attention to a potential ratification of anti-LGBTQ+ Sharia law in Brunei. The location was chosen because the Brunei Investment Agency (BIA) owns and operates the Dorchester Hotel and the Dorchester collection of hotels world-wide. The video of their disruption went viral and ultimately the larger movement was successful; the government backed down from passing the legislation. Jordan talked about how they were able to use theatrical image-making to help make the video more impactful and magnify the protest.

Coming back to the question of “the future,” Jordan ended his 10 minutes by wondering how, during this COVID pause, we artists could use our skill set to stage events/build images/build layers of meaning? How could we deploy these skills for radical action?

Sarah asked a couple of questions to kick off a discussion, inviting *Spectators* to join in with more questions through chat.

Throwing the first question to DM, she asked her to elaborate on the Cherie Dimaline quote: about being “*hunted for the thing that is needed.*” DM was quite emotional as she explained that for her it means “*how do I write an anti-racist statement and clean up this mess I made? And it doesn’t mean: can we look at your script and consider producing it? It means an ongoing pattern of being sucked dry by what other people need and the failure to ask the reciprocal question about what is needed in return.*”

Sarah then returned to the conversation to DM’s earlier statement, “*How can I stay fluid without being watered down,*” and asked if DM had things she did to help keep that balance in her life. DM shared that she asks herself, “*How does this come from me?*” rather than just taking the platform being offered.

DM’s statement connected with me too. This is something that I and many other BIPOC artists are struggling with in the face of this “awakening” to the systemic racism that permeates Canadian theatre and has permeated this art form since colonial structures began being built, and the subsequent requests and offers that are coming our way. How do I create work that grows from my own desire to say something, and not out of an opportunity given to me by someone in power?

Sarah next asked Jordan about events he had been involved with in Hungary, and how he uses that in his activism. Jordan discussed his involvement with a number of direct actions around gender identity, including reading the entirety of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* outside the Hungarian Parliament.

Sarah followed this up by asking about Jordan’s privilege and how he makes use of it in his activism.

Jordan reflected that he tries to leverage his white privilege to get into spaces and take on actions that help support the people he loves and cares about, who might have a harder time accessing those spaces. But one of his critiques of Extinction Rebellion is that it isn’t as diverse as it could be. He also talked about each person’s different level of risk around getting arrested. In his actions, he risked being deported, but he didn’t risk his life in the same ways that some racialized people do. Being a freelance artist, he also has a kind of security that allows him to

take some economic risks that people who might face losing a permanent job, for example, couldn't take on.

Sarah then opened the discussion up to DM and Jordan to see if they had any questions for each other. DM had an observation that she wanted to share with Jordan. When Jordan spoke about how the public imagination receives differently seeing a white grandma being arrested, DM heard herself being imagined out of the public, and also heard that violence to her body is commonplace and not worthy of mention or redress. She didn't want to ascribe any intention to Jordan or imply that Jordan meant that, but she wanted him to hear that it was uncomfortable for her to hear that her body had less value. Jordan thanked her for bringing this to his attention, and he said he wanted to bring it forward as a critique of Extinction Rebellion and the British media's highlighting of white protesters in Britain, which remains an ongoing problem in reporting around climate protests. He hopes it's different in Canada, but not sure that it is.

Sarah shared three questions from the chat:

*Do you feel this is a true moment of change, and if you do, how do you think we can keep this change permanent?*

*How can we give hope in our work as artists and not contribute to eco-anxiety when we perform on that issue? Do you believe we should give hope? Or press that this issue is important?*

*What kind of stories and/or narrative gestures do you feel can contribute to the thought shift that is needed for us to make the kind of societal change that we have the potential to make at this moment in time?*

In terms of climate, from last year onward, Jordan felt that young people created a huge change and he hoped that this momentum would continue despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

DM shared that this is a moment of true change, or even if it isn't, this is the moment for us to make change. This is it. If not now, when?

DM and Jordan are different people with different approaches and different focuses, grown from their DNA and radically divergent lives and lived experiences on this earth, and yet, what I heard from both was a desire to deconstruct theatrical traditions as a way to bring their authentic voice to the table as both artists and activists. Their politics and their art are indivisible, and they are moving forward with this dual focus and purpose.

It was powerful to hear them articulate this concept because they are both extraordinary writers and theatre artists. I think I related to this session because my 30 years in educational theatre for children and youth have led me down a similar path. A different path, for sure, but very much the same in terms of dual purpose. Since I began my theatre journey as a part of the original collective that started Concrete Theatre, I have felt the power of theatre as a tool, as a way to share truth, to ask questions and to connect to authentic self. I too can say my politics and art are indivisible.

And I know I am far from alone. This is what brought people to *The Green Rooms*.

Hearing Jordan and DM speak made me realize that if scientists are calling artists to join them in addressing the climate crisis, artists will be there. We will be there. Each in our unique and different way.

We have to be.

### **Evening Celebration: Dance Like the Earth is Watching DJ Syrus Marcus Ware**

*Dance Like the Earth is Watching* was a socially-distanced, emotionally-connected dance party across eight cities and three countries. For 50 sweaty minutes, we turned off our brains and grooved to the beat of DJ Syrus Marcus Ware's music.

This one-hour dance party was so beautiful. Chantal, Sarah and Syrus welcomed us and acknowledged the lands they were each coming from, and Syrus kicked it off with Lauryn Hill and *Lost Ones*. He created a safe space for release through his fantastic choice of diverse music (Sharon Jones and the Dap-Kings and so many more), the mixing-in of voices of artists, activists and scientists and the overwhelming sense of whimsy and playfulness that welcomed all participants to meet it as they chose to. Some folx had full-on dance parties alone in their homes/apartments or theatre spaces with lights and costumes. Others boogied in their office chairs with drinks and sunglasses. Some were able to gather with one or two other people within their bubbles (roommates and family members) and danced together as well as with the wider group. Still others created digital art that they could layer over their Zoom background. A puppet even made an appearance! There was lots of joyous chatter in the chat box, congratulating people on their home decorating, light shows, digital chops and dance moves.

As the night went on, folks got even more experimental and started Zoom-hopping: yes, that's right! Exiting their city's Room and digitally knocking on other city's doors and dancing with a new group of people! Martin Jones was our visual conductor throughout, mixing together and highlighting each of the interacting Green Rooms from the NAC in Ottawa, sometimes focusing on one room or featuring Syrus, and other times throwing everyone and all the rooms up together. So much playfulness, mindfulness and fun!

### **Day Three: The Closing Act June 12, 2020**

A conclusion to *The Green Rooms*, the *Closing Act* brought *Participants* and *Spectators* together one last time to share in some final words and thoughts from Chantal and Sarah, and gave an opportunity for *Participants* to co-create a 5-7 minute piece inspired by a shared vision of a different world. Working with the sounds of Matt Rogalsky and others, we went live at 2:30 pm EDT to share our creation with each other, as well as with any *Spectators* who wanted to help us close our three days together in style.

I wasn't sure what to expect when I discovered that the final event was a *co-creation* event. All I knew at this point was that the organizing team had already shown incredible creativity around the Opening Picnic and the previous night's dance party, so I was all in to try anything.

To get started, all the *Participants* were asked to join one of the eight Zoom calls representing the eight participating cities. I once again decided to join Kingston.

I found myself in a trio with a lovely pair of people: Tracey Guptil and Lib Spry. Tracey was the room's *Facilitator* and brought the prompts and tasks to us from Mission Control. Lib Spry, a wonderful theatre artist and academic living in Kingston, was as perplexed, curious and excited as I was to see how the event would unfold. We started by having our names recorded by

Mission Control on the livestream. When instructed we each said “*Hi, my name is...*” We also recorded ourselves reading names of presenters who had appeared throughout the three days.

Once we had done that, we had time to talk amongst the three of us about two burning questions we each had coming out of the three days. Each of us spoke about particular moments or ideas that had stuck with us from the conversations, and the questions that grew out of them. My two questions ended up being: *How can I accept that small actions will lead to real change?* And a second rooted in TYA: *How do we acknowledge children’s grief around climate change? (And not force them to be hopeful?)*

Tracey then passed on the next prompt, which was to come up with a promise we could make as we left our time together. I promised that I would continue to remind myself and others that action leads to hope. We were also asked to come up with a quote from the three days that we would take away with us – mine was: “*Our classes teach us a lot of sad things... but those classes don’t address how these facts make us feel.*” spoken by Dr. Atkinson in the very first conversation – and with a physical gesture that could represent the quote and the feelings that they inspired. As a group, the three of us decided on a pattern that would see us each start a gesture, which was echoed by the other two, before cycling onto the next person. Once our first three gestures were done, we had so much fun, we decided to continue to improvise new gestures in response to each other rather than to preplan them. We then had a few quick moments to write one of our questions and the quote on a piece of paper while we waited in our room to go live. We had all the pieces we needed for the co-creation!

It was actually very moving for me to be in a room with Lib. I first encountered Lib years ago when Concrete Theatre was first starting. As a small social action theatre just finding our feet, we had taken on duties as the editors of the Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance newsletter for several years, gathering stories on events and processes that were going on across the country, out of our tiny office in Edmonton. Lib was someone we looked up to, as we followed her incredible work in and with communities, on site-specific projects and, of course, her work with children and youth. I had lost touch with her after the CPTA closed down, but suddenly here we were in a room together. Somehow it felt beautifully fitting that our separate paths as artists, as humans, had brought us in a giant circle back together again, this time thinking about and working through questions on climate.

Suddenly Tracey got the sign that we were all ready to start. hilariously, all three of us immediately confessed we were nervous. Why? This was an experience we were all in together, right? But walking into the unknown is always unsettling. We quickly made a group agreement to have fun and go with the flow. This was a grand experiment after all! Tracey gave us a new Zoom link to go to and we all waved goodbye!

And whoosh, there we were in the main Zoom room once again. And Chantal and Sarah were back, hosting us in the center of a quilt of all of our rooms. It was impressive to see one last time, how many people were there from so many cities and countries.

They reflected back on the mid-March week when we all became aware of the seriousness of COVID-19, and the two of them were forced to think about how to keep questions about the climate crisis alive in the face of all the other urgent concerns. And then what happened when enormous questions were raised during the upswell of protest, thinking and action around white supremacy and anti-Black racism. And how they had to wrestle with how to look at climate in a moment that was demanding our focus be on social justice and change.

They then shared videos from artists from across Canada, the UK and New Zealand. The title: *We asked a bunch of artists to respond to the question of Climate Change right now.*

Corey Payette spoke from his home in Vancouver. Speaking of all the change he had witnessed over the last few months he posited *“We are capable of enormous change. And this has given me hope towards climate change.”*

Deborah Pearson spoke next from her garden in London, UK about how this pause had reinforced that *“we need to change everything.”*

Landon Krentz in Calgary expressed deep concern for Deaf artists in this COVID pause, as their opportunities are already so limited. To counteract that, he is working hard to stay connected with his community.

Marcus Youssef in Vancouver shared the contents of his Travel and Ticket folder, which contains itineraries for all his flights over the past 10 years. He admitted this was previously a secret point of pride for him, but was now full of cancelled flights, raising new questions about their necessity.

Mary Vingoe and Laura Vingoe-Cram joined us from Dartmouth. Laura stated that the COVID pause had *“given me space to think about who I am in society. Now with CERB, I have had time to think about things more deeply.”* Mary felt that the same willful blindness that allowed long-term care homes to be hit so tragically by the pandemic also allowed us to ignore climate change.

Yvette Nolan appeared next in Saskatoon. She challenged us, saying *“We the creatures who are responsible are on Time Out... it's too late for some things but the pause has shown us that we can change if we must. And we must.”*

Adrienne Wong joined us from Banff and she very much echoed Yvette. She had been thinking about how the world has restored itself so quickly because of the pandemic. She exhorted us *“So... I know we can do it... it's just a matter of doing it.”*

Debbie Patterson appeared on the shores of beautiful Lake Winnipeg to share the powerful idea that *“Climate justice and disability justice are one... right now we're in this moment where human wellbeing is perceived to be more important than human productivity, and we're all freaking out because our internalized ableism is roaring up and going ‘who are we if we're not producing? What value do I have if I'm not essential? If I can't work can I even exist?’ There is this desperation to keep working and keep producing stuff... but look at this lake... it's not doing any of these things and it's magnificent.”*

Finally, Espeth Tilley from Wellington, New Zealand shared that before the lockdown she was working on a biting satire called *Desperate Antics*, by New Zealand playwright Kevin Keys. The team tried to pivot and make it into a radio play, but quickly discovered that *“lockdown floodlit inequalities... and they fell across racial fault lines with Indigenous and migrant households disproportionately affected.”* She concluded: *“Lockdown helped me see my own privilege and better grasp the inequality that had been right under my nose all along. It made me question... how inclusive are we really?”*

Hearing these statements was very powerful. Knowing that we are all grappling with these difficult questions was somehow comforting to me. To know that I am not the only one living in a place of uncertainty, of re-thinking, of re-assessment, helps me feel less alone.

Despite the lockdown. Despite the Zoom boxes. Despite the space between us.

We are together.

It was time to say goodbye.

Sarah and Chantal introduced the final act, our co-creation piece, and contextualized it for the *Spectators*. They explained that *Participants* and facilitators were asked to create and improvise a response to the highlights, questions and themes of the three days, which would be scored by Matt Rogalsky, whose sounds had supported the entire event over the three days.

And the piece began.

Images of *Participants* performing our gestural movements, waving to one another, introducing ourselves, saying hello, laughing and sharing appeared over a sound-scape by Matt of our vocal tracks. Slowly people in each room began holding up pieces of paper, with their questions written on them in their individual computer screens, until the entire screen was full of questions from the three days, and we began to hear the names of all the artists, scientists and thinkers who had been a part of the Conversations spoken aloud as Matt wove them in and out of the sound-scape.

*Can theatre and performance allow us to model a new approach to a sustainable and just world?*

*What work do you need to do, to create the change you want to be? And see?*

*Is change as hard as we've been made to believe?*

*Can Universal Basic Income work?*

*COVID has given me the space to re-evaluate my time and priorities. What can I let go of to make space for the work that needs to be done?*

*How can I use my privilege to be an ally and accomplice for all living beings?*

*How is our local cultural survival connected to the global survival of our planet?*

*What actions can I implement today to move towards a positive change? Will it be enough?*

*How many more years do we have?*

*Have you found ways to face your grief?*

*Can I move from ego-system thinking to eco-system thinking?*

*What do I need to teach the children in my life?*

*Lead with love, you take care of what you love*

*How can I hear better? Fully?*

*How can theatremakers serve neighbours using practices of community self governance to mend eco-systems?*

And then as the music shifted we began to hear *Participants* share their quotes. These voices and visual quotes, again written on pieces of paper, found their way into the layers of the soundscape and visual quilt of Zoom screens.

*“Will you do the work to remove your knee?”* Ravi Jain

*“Perhaps the structures we live within have prevented us from seeing we’re wrong.”*  
Sarah Garton Stanley

*“Whenever I have power, I give it away.”* Ariel Martz-Oberlander

*“Our classes teach us a lot of sad things... but those classes don’t address how these facts make us feel.”* Dr. Jennifer Atkinson

*“If we’re truly in solidarity, you have to see yourself as the enemy.”* Ravi Jain

*“The scientists need us – the artists – to bring the emotion/the love/the meaning to their message.”* Jordan Tannahill

*“The revolution will be long and it will be messy.”* Karen Robinson via Ravi Jain

*“I am missing puddles.”* Kendra Fanconi

*“In the struggle for Climate Change, how do we acknowledge that we are both the enemy and the protestor?”* Eriel Tchekwie Deranger

And a shift in Matt’s sound-scape again brought us to a new series of images, with the photos of all the presenters appearing in the centre as we heard their names read out by *Participants* in a collage of voices building in a crescendo until Georgina Riel appeared once again, introducing herself in her own language and the land she is coming from: Ka’tarohkwi, now known as Kingston.

She started with a smudge so that we as a group could start these final thoughts in a good way.

She expressed her gratitude to everyone involved, to everyone who came, the hosts, the organizers, the artists. She shared with the group that this was one of the most stripped down and raw conversations she’s had. In part because we are not together, but apart. Because somehow, that allowed us to be vulnerable. She reminded us that our ancestors are watching, as we move forward. And she brought us back to the critical topics of oppression and racism, climate and environment and fiscal responsibility. The Venn diagram I spoke of at the beginning.

She advised us to be mindful for ourselves, but also for the people that are still to come. Because that is our responsibility and duty.

And with that we were brought back together again, in a colourful quilt of all our small screens and faces, sitting in silence for one final gentle moment of peace and stillness to take it all in.

And we were done.

## Conclusion

Thinking back to my imposter syndrome fears at the beginning of this process, to my questions about why I had been chosen to write about *The Green Rooms*, I realize that perhaps Sarah and Chantal chose me exactly because I am not a climate activist. Because I don't identify as an artist who focuses on environmental issues.

Because that is exactly who we need at the table right now.

We need everyone.

I was drawn into this emergency and implicated, as we all are, as soon as I sat down and thought about what is confronting us. As humans. Because like Black Lives Matter and the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis doesn't care where we're at in our personal journey. We need time to process, to understand, to work through it.

These movements, these pandemics, these environmental disasters will take us and shake us by the scruffs of our necks, and hold our faces to the paper until we are willing to open our eyes and see the truth. The ugly truths that have been there all along. Eriel Tchekwie Deranger named them the first day:

Capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy and extractivism.

Like Ravi said, "*You gotta listen. It's gotta hurt. If it doesn't hurt you're not listening, you're not looking at the right thing.*"

I take myself back to the beginning. To Dr. Atkinson's talk. To the Venn diagram she drew. And to that heartbreaking sentence now etched forever into our collective consciousness that exists at the intersection of Black Lives Matter, COVID-19 and climate change.

*I can't breathe.*

No matter where you enter the diagram from, you end up in the center.

No matter what brings you to the table, we end up together. In the center.

Action leads to hope.

**About the author**

Mieko Ouchi works as an actor, writer, director and dramaturg and is a co-founder and the current Artistic Director of Concrete Theatre and Associate Artist at the Citadel in Edmonton. Her plays are produced across Canada and internationally, have been translated into six languages and have been recognized with the Carol Bolt Prize, two Betty Awards and a Governor General's Award nomination. Her directing work has taken her from coast to coast of Canada. Upcoming projects include: directing Ravi Jain's *A Brimful of Asha* for the Citadel, co-directing and producing a national tour of Dave Clarke's ASL/Sung English family opera *Songs My Mother Never Sung Me* for Concrete Theatre and directing the premiere of her new play *Burning Mom* at the Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre.